

# An open letter to Scots MPs



NEIL ASCHERSON

DEAR Gordon Brown, George Galloway, Dennis Canavan, congratulations on your victory. You are three of the Scottish Labour MPs who were returned to Parliament on Thursday, who share in the tragedy and triumph of that day, which broke the hopes of Neil Kinnock at the British level, but which brought Labour in Scotland the most sweeping success in its history.

Two of you are young, George (the conqueror of Roy Jenkins) entering Parliament for the first time. Dennis is a veteran of many battles. But all three of you have been passionate, eloquent advocates of your party's commitment to devolution—to giving Scotland once more a Parliament of her own.

This letter, though, is not merely a felicitation. It is a question. What are you going to do about that commitment now?

Not one, but two elections seem to have taken place. Most of England has overwhelmingly reaffirmed its faith in Mrs Thatcher, who will rule Britain with an absolute majority. In Scotland, by contrast, Labour now holds no fewer than 50 of the 72 seats (the Alliance nine, the Scottish Nationalists three). And the Conservatives have been slaughtered. Of the 21 seats they held before, they retained only 10.

I should remind other readers of how Scotland is governed. It has a Whitehall but no Westminster. It has a small group of Scottish Office Ministers, headed by a Secretary of State who is a member of the Cabinet in London. All those Ministers are members of the governing party at Westminster.

In other words, a party which has less than one seventh of the Scottish seats now proposes to resume the undivided monopoly of executive power over Scotland. And there is more. Six out of every seven Scottish MPs belong to parties carrying home rule of some kind in their manifestos, a proportion reflecting public opinion on the matter. Only the Scottish Conservatives stand—I was going to say firm, but certain knees are already audibly knocking—against any kind of Assembly.

**Centralising ruler**

Is this the 'Doomsday Scenario' awaited by so many? It is not in outlines new. Mrs Thatcher has been governing Scotland without a Scottish mandate since 1979. But the collapse of Tory support in Scotland on Thursday gives the situation a desperate absurdity which is new in quality.

I think all three of you would agree that we are confronted by an outrage against the very principles of representative democracy. But Scotland is not entitled to an Assembly within the UK simply because a British government has been so fiercely rejected by the electorate. I would like to think that you would accept the case for devolution, even if Scotland had voted as strongly for the Conservatives as the South-east of England did on Thursday.

And it would be wrong to see the Scottish results as exclusively a 'vote for devolution.' Many motives were present, as they were in the North of England: above all, resentment at the cocksure style of Mrs Thatcher in imposing recipes which may suit the South-east of Britain upon regions and nations with other interests and other problems. For all her *laissez-faire* rhetoric, she is the most centralising ruler Britain has known since the war. Little remains of the libertarian content of *laissez-faire* when—the grim joke of our times—it is imposed upon those who didn't choose it.

During the election campaign and even more afterwards, there was agonised talk about the danger of 'two nations' emerging and about the need 'to unite our divided kingdom.' This was irritating. First because Britain has long been composed of three nations (leaving Ulster out of it) and split vertically into highly unequal classes. Secondly, 'unity' on its own is hardly a cure for social and political ills.

What, anyway is so wonderful about 'unity'? Your Mr Kinnock, who has also

**Fatal deficiency**

Gordon, George and Dennis, I would like to remind you in your moment of victory that Scotland does not 'belong' to Labour. Even today, your party has not gathered half of the popular vote—something which only the Tories have ever achieved in Scotland, in the 1950s. I will go further. I think it far from impossible that the Scottish people might one day choose something not unlike free enterprise Thatcherism, if it were offered by a leadership they had chosen themselves.

And, if an Assembly comes, I am uneasy at the idea that Labour, based on the urban populations of the central belt, would take all its powers for itself. One of the strongest arguments for decentralising power is within Scotland itself: a highly regionalised little country whose local interests and problems diverge and often conflict.

But let's come to the urgent question: what will you three do now? Or, to put it another way, is it possible to go on governing Scotland as before?

The pessimistic answer is: yes. Firstly, because, discredited and shaming as it would be, the Tories still have enough MPs to fill the Scottish Office Ministries. Even if their disaster had been greater, they would have been left in a variety of Scottish peers and other fish-foolmen to fill the posts.

Yes, secondly, because the Labour Party in Scotland suffers from a fatal lack of energy, a deficiency in the will to power. You three would gladly return to make your political careers in an Edinburgh Assembly, to try and make out of our poor country a model of democratic socialism for Europe. Many of your colleagues, however, want an easier life. They prefer comfortable opposition from the Westminster back benches to the chance of putting their policies into practice at home.

Personally, I am sorry that the honours of this great rout of the Scottish Tories were not more equally shared among other parties. Many of your colleagues respond only to fear. A bigger challenge from the Alliance and above all from the SNP would have avoided the danger of a passive complacency settling on the Labour Party in Scotland.

There are calls for action. One is for the summoning of an unofficial elected convention at Edinburgh to demand and draw up a plan for internal home rule: a polite but firm challenge to the supremacy of Parliament. Others demand obstruction and disruption, on the old Irish model, from the Scottish MPs.

You three know as well as I that the Scottish people will not rebel or riot over this. You know, too, that if you take any of these 'unconstitutional' courses, your party leaders—in London and probably in Scotland too—will reproach, ridicule and probably disown you. But if you do nothing, a deep and humiliating wound will have been stabbed into the reputation of democracy, of your party, of the political process itself—and not in Scotland alone. It has fallen to you, and to those of your colleagues who think like you, to defend those causes. Do it without fear, and do it well.

**HOW BRITAIN VOTED**

(Figures in percentages, change since 1983 in parentheses)  
Source: (The Electoral Commission)

	Con	Lab	Lib/DP	Others
ALL	43.3 (+0.2)	31.6 (+3.3)	23.1 (+2.9)	2.0 (+0.2)
Sex				
MEN	41.0	31.1 (-1)	23.9	3.1 (-1)
WOMEN	45.1 (+1)	31.1 (+3)	22.3	3.1 (+1)
Age				
18-29 YEAR-OLDS	26 (-3)	35 (-3)	25 (+1)	3 (-1)
30-44 YEAR-OLDS	41 (+2)	31 (-2)	25 (+4)	3 (0)
45-54 YEAR-OLDS	44 (0)	31 (-2)	22 (-2)	3 (0)
55+ YEAR-OLDS	47 (-2)	31 (-2)	21 (0)	3 (-2)
Class				
A1 (Professional)	54 (-1)	19 (-2)	20 (-3)	3 (0)
C1 (Clerical)	47 (-2)	24 (+4)	26 (-3)	2 (0)
C2 (Skilled manual)	42 (+4)	35 (-3)	21 (-5)	2 (-2)
DE (Semi/unskilled manual)	31 (-1)	46 (+1)	20 (-2)	3 (0)
TRADE UNION MEMBERS	25 (0)	42 (+4)	25 (-4)	3 (0)
UNEMPLOYED WORKERS	25 (+1)	52 (+5)	20 (-4)	3 (-2)
HOME OWNERS	47 (-2)	25 (+4)	25 (-2)	2 (0)
COUNCIL TENANTS	22 (-2)	58 (+7)	14 (-7)	6 (+1)
PRIVATE RENTED	34 (+2)	41 (+4)	23 (-4)	1 (-2)
Region				
LONDON	46.4 (+2.5)	31.4 (+1.6)	21.5 (-3.2)	0.7 (+0.9)
REST OF SOUTH-EAST	55.8 (+1.2)	16.9 (+0.8)	26.8 (-1.9)	0.5 (+0.2)
SOUTH-WEST	59.5 (+0.8)	16.2 (+1.5)	22.8 (-0.4)	0.5 (+0.3)
EAST ANGLIA	52.0 (+1.1)	21.7 (-1.2)	25.8 (-2.5)	0.5 (+0.2)
EAST MIDLANDS	48.6 (+1.4)	20.1 (+2.1)	21.0 (-3.1)	0.3 (+0.4)
WEST MIDLANDS	45.6 (+0.6)	23.3 (+2.3)	20.8 (-2.0)	0.3 (+0.1)
YORKS & HUMBERSIDE	37.5 (+1.2)	41.5 (+1.2)	21.1 (-2.9)	0.3 (+0.2)
NORTH-WEST	38.0 (+0.0)	41.2 (-5.2)	20.6 (-2.8)	0.2 (+0.4)
NORTH	32.0 (-2.7)	47.0 (-7.1)	20.8 (-4.0)	0.2 (+0.9)
SCOTLAND	24.6 (+4.3)	52.4 (+7.3)	19.2 (+5.3)	3.1 (+2.3)*
WALES	25.5 (-1.5)	45.9 (-1.7)	17.9 (-5.3)	1.3 (+0.9)*

**WHY BRITAIN VOTED**

(Figures in percentages)  
Source: (The Electoral Commission)

	Con	Lab	Lib/DP	Others
Q: What is the ONE most important reason for supporting the party you have just voted for?				
The party's policies	50	58	48	48
I usually vote for that party	18	19	25	8
Duties of another party	13	9	12	23
The party leader	8	8	6	4
The local candidate	5	3	5	10
None of these	5	3	5	7
Q: Did you vote for your first choice party, or did you vote tactically, to defeat another party?				
Vote for 1st choice	81	88	81	71
Vote tactically	17	11	17	28
Q: When did you make up your mind (how) you would vote today?				
Today	8	5	5	12
During the last week	10	8	8	20
Since the election was called	21	23	18	32
Some time before the election was called	60	66	64	44
Q: When you decided which way to vote, which two issues did you consider most important?				
Unemployment	42	16	66	53
National Health Service	23	7	37	30
Prices/Inflation	20	36	8	10
Nuclear weapons	19	11	22	27
Schools/Education	17	29	4	13
Defence	14	18	8	12
Crime/Law and order	11	5	18	13
Pensions/Welfare benefits	10	18	2	5
Taxation	6	10	3	3
Trade unions	6	6	6	6
Housing/Rates	5	3	3	3
Privatisation	2	3	2	2
Immigration/Race relations	2	3	2	2
Q: Do you believe the system of electing MPs should be changed from the present 'first past the post' method to a form of proportional representation?				
The present system	49	57	47	21
A form of proportional representation	48	38	48	75
Don't know	5	5	5	4

This  
than any Labour MP  
who wishes to do anything effective  
about devolution, calling a Scottish Assembly  
for instance to take over from  
Mr Rifkind has to sacrifice his prospects  
& ambitions @ Westminster  
for an ill paid and draughty  
seat at the Royal High School